

Rocky Mountain Outlook
By Carol Picard
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GOVERNMENT ASSESSING RISKS OF BEAR INCIDENTS

The province has embarked on a hazard assessment of the Bow Valley from Banff National Park to Bow Valley Provincial Park to see how often, where and why bears are running into trouble. The \$7,000 assessment, underway for about a month, will attempt to identify where the high risk areas are for bears to interact with humans and try to come up with conflict management strategies, said provincial wildlife biologist Jon Jorgenson.

Jay Honeyman, a member of the Karelian Bear Team, has been contracted to pull together all of the data from a number of different sources. Jorgenson said the goal is to have a usable data base and a report with recommendations within a few months.

The task, however, is daunting. Pulling data from telemetry reports of collared or tagged bears, the Eastern Slopes Grizzly Bear Project, reported sightings by the public, aversive conditioning reports, and occurrence reports of actual interactions, more than 15,000 computer entries were made. Those were winnowed down to 9,000 by eliminating those that didn't occur within the study area's boundaries, and the whittling continues, Jorgenson said. "It's quite a job to pull it all together — there's a lot of different sources of data out there," Jorgenson said. The study will not only tally the actual number of bear/human interactions, it will divide the study area, and the town of Canmore, into grids and plot the data into those areas so researchers know where most of the incidents historically have occurred.

The nature of each incident will also be noted, such as whether the bear was feeding on garbage, birdseed, fallen fruit, buffalo berry bushes or dog food. As well, the study will look at bear habitat and pinpoint the best areas for naturally occurring bear food such as shepardia, or buffalo berries.

Finally, the study will overlap all of that information with existing trails and areas of high recreational use such as golf courses.

In many cases, anecdotal evidence already tells provincial officials where problems are going to occur, such as Rundview and up at the Canmore Nordic Centre and Quarry Lake in late August and into the fall.

“The study will put numbers to things rather than opinion — it will give us ground work to know where to apply different education programs and management activities. Basically, before we get going you need to know what your problems are before you can tackle them effectively,” Jorgenson said.

Honeyman will also compare data post-1999, when the current data collection method was introduced, with the reports generated prior to 1999 to see if the two types of data can mesh. Additionally, he will look at occurrences that occurred before Canmore’s summer birdfeeder ban came into play and before the Town eliminated curbside garbage collection in favour of community bear-proof garbage bins.

The hazard assessment will form one of the key components of Canmore’s WildSmart program, details of which are still being hammered out by a multi-party stakeholders committee.

The committee, formed after local resident Isabel Dube was killed by a grizzly bear near the SilverTip Golf Course last June, would like to have a public education and awareness campaign and effective wildlife management plan in place before summer.

Despite the seemingly vast amount of information about bears and their behaviour that is currently available, the need for education and public awareness was emphasized by numerous committee members at its most recent meeting Jan 11. “Right now, we’re missing the average person. If you walked 10 blocks in Canmore and interviewed everyone you met, you’d find a very small number who can identify the food sources, even if they are hikers,” said Tourism Canmore’s John Samms.